

A large portrait of Manuel Baerga, a middle-aged man with dark hair, smiling. He is wearing a brown and white striped shirt. The background of the entire page is a sunset over a body of water with a city skyline in the distance.

A PLACE TO FIND HELP

NTB MANAGER MINISTERS TO AREA HISPANICS

"I WANTED TO BE A PASTOR, AGAIN, TO BE THERE TO HELP PEOPLE WHEN THEY ARE IN PAIN AND SUFFERING."

-Manuel Baerga, manager, No Turning Back Annapolis

The No Turning Back Behavioral Health facility, which opened in Annapolis earlier this year, is not only a place where people with addictions can find help. It's also open to the local Hispanic community to serve both spiritual and material needs, according to NTB program manager Manuel Baerga, who is also an ordained minister.

"We're using the No Turning Back office as a place where people can come for spiritual and family counseling, attend Bible classes, or receive help with (donated) furniture and clothing," Baerga says.

Since 2012, Baerga and his wife, Laura, have been pastors at the Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis. Last year, Pastor Greg St. Cyr appointed them missionaries to the local Hispanic community. Hispanics make up about 17 percent of the city's population.

In working with Hispanics in the region, Baerga has several objectives:

- Unite teens and parents divided by language and cultural barriers
- Help Hispanic immigrants learn about American language and culture
- Engage local civic organizations to help advocate for positive change
- Host outreaches and other events in the Hispanic community

Baerga became a minister about 30 years ago when he was employed by Teen Challenge, a nonprofit addiction recovery program in Capitol Heights, Md. Several years ago, he resigned his post as Teen Challenge executive director because he had found himself spending much of his time on raising funds, supervising staff, and other administrative duties. He felt like a businessman, which he had no desire to be. "I wanted to be a pastor, again, to be there to help people when they are in pain and suffering."

AN ALTERNATIVE CHURCH

He also wanted to provide another alternative to the "Hispanic churches in the Latin American countries, which tend to be very traditionalist. I wanted to have the freedom to go out to where the people are living, in the inner city – not just trying to get people to join the church, but finding ways to meet their needs and share the gospel."

Baerga notes that some of the more traditionalist Hispanic churches preach against things like music and dancing, and even soccer games, because of the beer advertising that is often involved. "Some people might say, 'I'm not going to exchange my soccer game for church,' when the reality is, they don't have to. We want to share with them the kind of God who loves them – not just trying to take away the things they do to enjoy themselves – but to get to know God from a less-judgemental point of view.

"That's been our desire – to bring to Hispanics the understanding of a God that cares for them and wants them to be free to enjoy life without excess or hurting other people, of course."

The Baergas are also serving as a bridge between those who have and those who do not have. "We know people who have means – clothing, furniture, vehicles. They can help us reach people with the gospel and help those who don't have the basics."

As part of the mission, the Baergas want to open a thrift store in Annapolis – similar to one opened by No Turning Back in Baltimore – to help local people in need obtain clothing and other necessities at very low cost.

"A lot of people come here and they live with fear of being deported. So, they try to save most of the money they make to send home. That leaves them with very little money for necessities.

"Also, they discover that living here costs a lot; rent is high and (public) transportation is not great, so you have to acquire a car. So they need to spend more than half of what they make just to survive. Some of them don't even have a bed to sleep on; they would rather send money home and sleep on the floor.

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- Manuel Baerga

"When people have a need, that opens the door for us to make friends. And, at the same time, we can identify men or women who have problems with alcohol or young people who use drugs, and get them into our program."